THE UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES

ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

August, 1991

HIV/AIDS AT GENERAL CONFERENCE XV

By Reverend Dr. Stephen Pieters

For all the discussion about racism, international concerns, the women's secretariat, and spiritual diversity at General Conference XV in Phoenix, AZ, there were a great number of people spending a lot of time and energy dealing with HIV and AIDS. The impact of HIV is being felt at every level of the Fellowship; and workshops, lectures, support groups and services for people with HIV/AIDS, and a week-long prayer vigil reflected this universal concern.

I was thankful that the General Conference began with the Memorial Service. It gave me an opportunity to acknowledge my grief in the safety of my family of faith; to actively miss the people with whom I sat at the last General Conference; and to face my fear as I look at dear friends who are fighting for their lives, or preparing to die.

The attendance at the PWA/HIV Support Group at General Conference increased by 150% over the last Conference in St. Paul. And many persons present at the groups commented how they knew there were many, many more at this Conference, who for many reasons chose not to attend the group. Nevertheless, seeing about 50 people come in and out of the groups as the week went on was very overwhelming to someone who remembers being one of two people with AIDS at General Conference in 1985.

Some people with AIDS complained that it was impossible to get a room close to the conference proceedings. The hotel and the conference planners are already making plans to rectify this for General Conference XVI. There were not enough cots in the PWA rest area. Next time, we plan to have Pastoral Care Staff at the rest area full time, in addition to more cots. Many people with various physical challenges complained that they could not see what was happening in worship due to the frequent standing. It will be printed in the next Conference Booklet that the first two rows at Worship are to be reserved for people with AIDS and other physical challenges.

Some people with AIDS who are extremely thin as a result of HIV complained about the pain caused by the frequent hugging at an MCC Conference. Well people are accustomed to giving a good, hearty hug to friends, especially when it is apparent that a friend is going through a hard time. But when a person is wasted from the effects of HIV disease, a hug can be painful! A gentle touch can convey the feeling behind a hug. The message from these sisters and brothers is: at least ask if the person would like a hug, and don't be offended if they say "no".

The Rev. Houston Burnside of San Diego, CA, organized and ran the week-long Prayer Vigil, held in the chapel above the Grand Ballroom. The Vigil Candle was lit at the beginning of the Conference at the Memorial Service, and it was carried to and from the chapel for all Worship Services. Many people enjoyed quiet Communion, healing and prayer services during all hours of the night and day.

The AIDS programming received uniformly good reviews, with the only criticism being that there wasn't enough. There were seven workshops, ranging from Safe Sex to Public Policy to Pastoral Care: "The Difficult Emotional Issues," and "Grief and More Grief," to creating a "Spiritual Strength For Survival" Support Group.

Alexandra M. Levine, M.D., received consistently glowing comments for her medical presentation. People particularly appreciated the hour and a half opportunity for questions and answers. Many people found, as they had at the UFMCC AIDS Conference in Houston in 1990, that Dr. Levine explained HIV and its treatment so clearly, that it was the first time they really understood what's going on!

Television actress and AIDS activist Alison Arngrim was the featured speaker at the AIDS Network Luncheon on Friday. Following a brief montage of clips from "Little House on the Prairie" showing Alison as Nellie Oleson, she kept the audience laughing as she described her experiences with AIDS, first with her TV-husband, actor Steve Tracy (who died in 1986), and subsequently with her work in the AIDS movement. People appreciated her upbeat approach to AIDS work, and a number of people were heard quoting her remark, "When I get burned out, somehow I keep getting re-lit!"

Alison's Safe Sex workshop on Saturday was also a hit. Many people who teach safe sex in their local communities were delighted to discover new

HIV/AIDS AT GCXV {cont'd}

"tricks" to help their educational efforts! A number of people commented how much they appreciated how accessible Alison was throughout the conference, and many took the opportunity to get an autograph, or book her for an appearance at their local church.

Personally, I was most grateful at this General Conference for the presence of the Rev. Robert Pierce, Pastor of Holy Trinity MCC in Sarasota, FL. It was difficult for all of us to see the physical changes in Robert that we've seen in too many others. In spite of the pain and fatigue that he was obviously suffering, he moved about the Conference with a sense of grace that can only be described as amazing! I felt blessed and rested whenever I spent time with him. He blessed all of us when he consecrated Communion at the Memorial Service.

"Nellie Oleson" Reflects on General Conference XV

By Alison Arngrim

Dear UFMCC,

I thought of sending you all individual thank you notes, but Steve said the best way to thank all of you at once would be to run it in *ALERT*.

My trip to Arizona was wonderful. At times I thought I was at a convention of Jewish mothers. "Are you getting enough to eat? Is your room alright? Are you getting too much sun? Are you getting enough rest? (Tons. Perfect. No, I have sunblock. Yes, thank you).

Several Firsts

I should tell you that I've never been to a UFMCC General Conference before. I should also tell you a few other things I've never done before.

Although I've done many safer sex workshops of various kinds, this was the First Ever Non-Androcentric Produce-Oriented Safer-Sex Workshop with cantaloupe. (after the response it got, I'm sure it will not be the last.)

This was the first time I've ever been to Arizona without getting a sunburn. This was the first time Nellie Oleson was ever written about in the religion section of a newspaper. This was the first time I have ever witnessed a healing service like the one given by Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey.

I do believe it was also the first time I ever heard Dr. Alexandra Levine get an "Amen" during a lecture on the immune system. And it was definitely the first time I ever heard "People of Leather" introduced at a church function.

It was my first time attending a workshop on ministering to survivors of ritual abuse. It was the first time I'd ever heard Marsha Stevens sing. It was the first time I'd heard about the people she used to work with and why they won't let her sing with them anymore.

It was not the first time I'd ever wondered what some people do with their brains when they're not using them.

Speaking of which, it was not the first time I'd been somewhere where there were protesters saying horrible things about gay men and lesbians. In fact, I've gotten kind of blase about that sort of nonsense over the years. When I first arrived and Ralph Masek told me on the way from the airport that there had been demonstrators, I was almost disappointed to have missed them. I felt somewhat differently by closing services.

See, I forget sometimes. I was raised in New York and Hollywood by very so-called "progressive" parents. I have always known and loved gay people, I was never taught not to.

So I was a little unnerved by the number of people at the conference who said things to me like, "It's so good of people like you to speak out for people like us" "I can't believe you're here" "Why did you come?" "Why do you like us?" (Seriously, I thought I was talking to Sally Field at the Oscars.) How anyone could really dislike any of the people I met at the conference is beyond me, but apparently some of you had been spooked pretty good by straight people. My apologies on their behalf.

They've spooked me a few times too. The only other attempt at a healing service I ever saw was at a church where they said terrible violent things about women, Jews and gay people. When they approached the altar, there was a lot of yelling and pushing, people screamed out as if they were in pain. I'm afraid I don't have a background in this sort of thing, so I was really scared. There also seemed to be an inherent violence in these people that came through in the service.

You can imagine my amazement when the Rev. Elder Harvey announced that she did not use the term "slain in the spirit", because God does not kill people at the altar and that Jesus is a gentle man. (I always suspected as much). Although being a timid Episcopalian (God's Frozen Chosen) I did not personally approch the altar, I watched for several hours and at no point was I frightened or did I feel unsafe. At no point did I see anyone in pain. In fact, it was the first time I ever understood why people would want to do this. A healing service indeed.

The workshop on ritual abuse was also an eye opener. I unfortunately was already aware of many of the gruesome things going on out there, but had yet to

"Nellie Oleson" on GCXV (cont'd)

see a church take an active role in the recovery of survivors. A few churches have just started to publish booklets addressing the problems of sexual abuse and I know a few good pastors working on the issue, but nothing resembling the open discussion I heard at the conference. When I mentioned this, one of the explanations I was given was that when you're out of the closet about one thing, you tend to come out of the closet about others. May you continue to yank all the doors open.

Not only do you yank open doors, you seem to be constantly inviting people in. I think I was invited to speak at every MCC in the country. As long as you promise to make it as much fun as General Conference, that's fine by me. (I'm waiting to hear from Minneapolis, Minnesota, land of Walnut Grove itself.)

So there I am after all this, sitting in the back row at the closing service. I heard that woman with the great voice sing "Standing on Holy Ground". Then I heard her story about how she used to be a prostitute on the streets of Kansas City until someone from MCC invited her in. About how she now works as a nurse and how she didn't even know she could sing until a couple of years ago.

Then Troy Perry announced that the demonstrators were back. Suddenly I wasn't so blase anymore. In fact I felt the distinct presence of Nellie Oleson creeping up on me. Like right before she trashed everything in her room.

I stayed in the hotel with all of you. But I actually had an impulse to run outside. What on earth was I going to say to these people? "Excuse me, but ARE YOU TOTALLY OUT OF YOUR MINDS?!! Don't you know what's going on in there? People are being healed. People who were molested and abused are being healed and comforted. People on drugs and alcohol are getting sober. Prostitutes are getting off the streets. People with AIDS are being cared for. People who didn't think God loved them or that there even was a God are praying and singing with their hands in the air. And you want to STOP THEM??!! HAVE YOU FLIPPED??!!

Look I know nobody believed Mary Magdalene either when she said she saw Jesus and I hardly expect you to believe me, but I have just spent five days with the UFMCC and I have seen the risen Lord. These people are for real."

(For anyone who was wondering if I was affected by any of the worship services, I guess we cleared that up.)

Well, I didn't go yell at anybody that day. A good thing too, or I would have missed lunch with that nice man from Chicago.

As soon as I finish writing this, I have to finish the card I'm making for Rev. Steve Pieters birthday. (How many birthdays has it been since the doctors said he wasn't supposed to have any more?) I'm using a picture taken at the conference and will write something obnoxious on it. Ask him to show it to you when you see him.

Thank you all for a lovely time and keep up the good work.

Love, Alison

Pieters to Participate in U.S. National Commission Round-Table

The Rev. Steve Pieters, Field Director of UFMCC AIDS Ministry and Editor of ALERT, has been invited to participate in a roundtable discussion of the Working Group on Religious Communities of the U.S. National Commission on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

The focus of the discussion will be "the current issues and concerns of religious organizations in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the interface between the religious communities' response and the federal government's response to the epidemic."

The Commission was created by the U.S. Congress "to make recommendations to Congress and the President 'for a consistent national policy concerning AIDS' and the HIV epidemic."

The Working Group on Religious Communities was created by the Commission "to gain a better understanding of how religious communities have responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic." Commissioners Larry Kessler (Chair), Diane Ahrens, Scott Allen, and Eunice Diaz serve on the Working Group.

The meeting will take place on August 26 in Washington, D.C.

ALERT

ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters. For information on how to receive *ALERT*, please write to: ALERT, c/o UFMCC, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90029.

I'M STILL DANCING! A GAY MAN'S HEALTH EXPERIENCE

{Author: Stephen Pieters;
Book Review by: Kittredge Cherry}

When Rev. Stephen Pieters was diagnosed with AIDS, someone warned him, "You can't tap dance your way through this one, Steve."

But seven years later, as he proclaimes in the title of his new book, *"I'm Still Dancing!"*

The book also shows that living with AIDS has not been easy, and that is why it is so powerful and moving. Rev. Pieters is extraordinarily honest in chronicling his own struggles with fear, anger, pain, homophobia, and despair. He tells how faith and hope have carried him through seven years of living with AIDS. He describes his brush with death, and the challenges presented by healing. I was especially touched by his reflections on the question, "How can I explain the miracle of my health?" Rev. Pieters' story will inspire anyone who has ever wrestled with questions of faith and meaning.

I'm Still Dancing is a collection of articles (previously published in UFMCC's *ALERT* and *Journey* magazines), sermons, journal entries, and two popular brochures available from the UFMCC Church Services Dept. Taken as a whole, they are a testament to healing and maturity. The book is also enjoyable to read because it is full of true-to-life details. For example, here is what Rev. Pieters did on the day of his AIDS diagnosis: "That night, as friends gathered around me, I watched *I Love Lucy* and *Poltergeist*. We had a major summit meeting on ordering just the right pizza. I took great delight in serving big bowls of ice cream. We hugged and cried and laughed."

Yes, Steve Pieters is still dancing, and everyone who reads his book will find themselves dancing along, too.

{Available from Chi Rho Press, P.O. Box 1864, Gaithersburg, MD 20898; USA (301) 670-1859; $8.95 plus postage/handling; reduced cost for large orders!}

Newsletters for Women, Children with HIV

{by Michelle Roland; reprinted with permission from
AIDS Treatment News; Issue #30 - 7/12/90}

The Positive Woman is a national newsletter by and for HIV-positive women and their families and friends. It includes news on standard medical treatments, "alternative" treatments, referral information, and letters from subscribers. Recent issues have included articles on legal matters, sexuality, spirituality, vaccine and drug trials, and a listing of Washington, D.C. area clinics which provide care to persons who are homeless.

The Positive Woman is published every other month. Yearly subscriptions are $12 for individuals, $40 for non-profit organizations, and $75 for businesses. For more information call 202/898-0732, or write to *The Positive Woman*, P.O. Box 34372, Washington, D.C. 20043.

WORLD (Women Organized to Respond to Life-Threatening Diseases), a new monthly newsletter in English and in Spanish, is published for women with HIV in Northern California. The first issue includes an article on gynecological manifestations of HIV, listings of support groups, a calendar of events, information on research studies and political groups, and a personal testimonial.

The second issue expanded coverage of events from the San Francisco area to Northern California; coverage will expand beyond Northern California when women in other areas express interest. Future plans include a series of informal surveys to assess the needs, thoughts, and desires of women living with AIDS.

WORLD is free, but donations are appreciated. To be included on the mailing list, or for more information, write: *WORLD*, P.O. Box 11535, Oakland, CA 94611, or phone 415/658-6930. Specify whether you want the English or the Spanish edition.

Children with AIDS, published every two months, covers medical issues, legal issues, social services, and the needs of drug-exposed and of HIV-positive children and their families. Articles are targeted to professionals working with children, family members, policy makers, and the public. Recent issues have included articles on civil rights for children with AIDS or HIV, and reports from the Sixth National Pediatric AIDS Conference and from the First National Conference on AIDS and Homeless Youth.

Annual subscriptions are $25. For more information, write: *Children with AIDS*, 1800 Columbus Avenue, Roxbury, MA 02119, or phone 617/442-7442. Article submissions also welcome.